

Pragmatic functions of verbal *-le*
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1.0 Introduction

A proper analysis of Chinese Verbal *-le*, especially its tense and aspect meaning, is a subject of intense debate among scholars at home and abroad. However, there is no consensus on this issue. The confusion of the tense–aspect meaning of verbal *-le* will greatly influence its accurate translation. Besides, many scholars devote to the study of the meaning of verbal *-le* while few pay attention to its pragmatic functions.

In this paper, we will study the pragmatic functions of verbal *-le*. How data and theory can interact with each other also attracts our attention, because on the basis of parallel corpus, the pragmatic functions of verbal *-le* can be explored reasonably and convincingly. Additionally, in order to overcome the shortcomings of intuition–based method, we use the corpus data as the principal attested language.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Corpus used in the paper

In the study, English–Chinese parallel corpora aligned at the sentence level are taken as the data for analysis, and the data are suitable for the purpose of the research and manipulation; besides, frequency of the words in question is also an important criterion for the selection of the data. First and foremost, prominent characteristics of the data are representativeness, authoritativeness and width. All the texts are from famous contemporary fictions, prose and essays between 1930s and 2000 whose languages are all “New Chinese” after the May 4th movement.

2.2 Data collection

The software of Excel, Concordance and CIPP_JS is used to count *-le* in Chinese texts and its equivalent forms in English texts. With the help of these softwares we can make indexes and wordlists, count word frequencies, compare different usages of words and analyze keywords.

As representativeness is a compulsory requirement for the study, a random sampling technique is used to select the data when the pragmatic function of verbal *-le* is studied in parallel corpus. According to the simple random sampling technique, each unit—each passage or chapter is numbered from 1 to N (N is the size of the population), and a table of random numbers that is used to select *n* items for the sample.

3.0 Pragmatic Functions of Verbal *-le*

In the author's other articles, the tense–aspect meaning of verbal *-le* has been discussed, and the conclusion was drawn that *-le* is an actual aspect marker. Here, we will approach the pragmatic function of verbal *-le*—an anteriority marker and a peak marker.

3.1 Verbal *-le* as an anteriority marker

Mandarin Chinese is generally treated as a tenseless language, which is different from English expressing time by means of inflectional changes. However, even if verbs in Chinese do not have inflectional changes, it still has the notion of time. The temporal reference in Chinese is denoted by time expressions or through the relationship between situations (Xiao 2004: 115).

Halliday and Hasan (2001: 318) expound lexical cohesion, including two aspects referred to as reiteration and collocation in English. This device also works well in Chinese that if there is no lexical cohesion to make the relation of verbal expressions, *-le* will function as an anteriority marker, for example:

- (1) 其实你看了电影再去听戏也成。
You can go to the opera after you've seen the film.
- (2) I shall send for my clothes when I get to Longbourn ...
我到了浪博恩就派人来取衣服...

In the sentence above, no lexical collocation is exhibited by 看电影“see the film” and 听戏“go to the opera”, or by 到浪博恩“get to Longbourn” and 派人来取衣服“sent for clothes”. Here, verbal *-le* appears to show that one event precedes the other, and the former holds a cause-effect to the latter, which is called anteriority. To be concrete, in sentence (1), as the event 看电影“see the film”, temporally and logically precedes the event 听戏“go to the opera”, verbal *-le* is used to indicate anteriority of the first event. Similarly in sentence (2), verbal *-le* after 到“get to” allows this verb the anterior status in relation to the next verb 派“sent for”.

In the following, we will elaborate on the anterior function of verbal *-le* in “cause-effect” clauses, “action purpose” clauses and serial verb construction in future tense.

(3) Cause-effect clause

- a. 从此死了心，准备向你老弟认输，以后再也不吹牛了。
Since then, I've given up. I'm ready to acknowledge defeat to you, old chap.
- b. ...but I was in hopes you might have got some good news from town, so I took the liberty of coming to ask.
不过，我料想你们一定获得了从城里来的好消息，所以我来大胆地问一问。

In this sentence, 死心“give up” in the first clause expresses the cause, while 认输 “give up” and 以后再也不吹牛“acknowledge defeat to you, old chap” are the effects. However, on many occasions, there is no *-le* in the former clauses, but, the latter clauses interpret the results arising from the former, as in the following sentence.

- (4) 一旦她走出〈了〉本来生活的小圈子，走出〈了〉舞台，走进〈了〉社会生活的深水里、激流中，以她异常敏感的眼睛，富有情感的心灵去观察生活、体验生活时，她发现那些纷至沓来的新鲜事物，根本来不及用电影去表现。
As her perspectives broadened and she began to move beyond the stage, the small circle she used to be confined to, she found herself a keen observer of what was going on about her. New things ran into her, one after another, so fast and fascinating that she decided something more efficient than motion picture was needed to convey her reflections on life.

The differences between sentence (3a) and (3b) lie in whether the speaker emphasizes the former clauses as the cause of the latter or the former ones temporally and logically precede the latter. From the rhetorical point of view, verbal *-le* is often used in the former one to arrange clauses in a proper order.

(5) Action-purpose clause

- a. 他一把搂住了小姑娘，擦了涌出眼眶的泪水说：“小朋友，钱包不是我的，快！你把它交给前边走的那个阿姨。”
... folded her in his arms... Quickly wiping his eyes he said, “Young friend, the purse is not mine. Hurry! Return it to the auntie up there ahead of us!”
- b. And taking her hand, he would have given it to Mr. Darcy, who though extremely by surprised, was not unwilling to receive to...
他拉住了伊丽莎白的手，预备往达西面前送，达西虽然极为惊奇，可亦是不愿意接住那只手。

In the sentence above, 把它交给前边走的那个阿姨 “return it to the auntie up there ahead of us” is the purpose of the action 一把搂住小姑娘 “fold the little girl”; however, the purpose clause in sentence (5a) is unactualized situation, which explains why there is no verbal *-le* following the verb 交给 “return”. Additionally, as the purpose clause follows the action clause, the action event becomes the reference time of purpose event. The actuality of the purpose event is ensured by action event. In the “action-purpose” clause, it is reasonable to interpret *-le* after the verb as indicating the relationship between the action and purpose.

(6) Serial verb construction sentence in future tense

- a. 你明天可以起身，做哪一类事情，到了矿上我再打电报给你。
I'll send you a wire when you get there and let you know exactly what you job will be.
- b. ...for it is provoking me to retaliate, and such things may come out as will shock your relations to hear.
因为你这样做会引起我的报复心，我也会说出一些事情来叫你的亲戚们吓一跳。

In this sentence, the time expression 明天 “tomorrow” refers to a future time. As E_2 打电报给你 “send you a wire” serves as the reference time of E_1 到了矿上 “get there”, the actuality of E_1 is guaranteed. However, as E_2 has no posterior RT, its actuality is at stake. In other words, for E_1 precedes E_2 , verbal *-le* occurs in E_1 to indicate the actualization and anteriority of the event. Therefore, it may be concluded that *-le* is an actual marker and an anteriority marker.

A situation that actualizes in relation to a future reference time must have a following event to serve as its reference time and ensure its actualization which is presented in the preceding sentence. Furthermore, this rule also explains the unacceptability of the following example.

- (7) ...到矿上,我再打了电报给你。
 E_1 E_2

As there is no *-le* following the verb of E_1 , we cannot judge whether E_1 has actualized or not or whether there is another event following E_1 . On the contrary, event if E_2 takes *-le* there is no following event to serve as the RT and guarantee the actualization of it and *-le* cannot mark E_2 prior to another event, thus the sentence is ungrammatical and unacceptable.

Therefore, the conclusion that can be drawn from above analyses is that verbal *-le* is an anteriority marker expressing one event prior to another.

3.2 Verbal *-le* as a peak marker

Some scholars put forward the notion of peak as a sentence of a particular semantic importance within a segment. Liu (1988) demonstrates that if there are several verb phrases in a sentence, verbal *-le* often follows the last one. Besides, he proposes a formula as follows:

$$(8) \quad P=(VP+VP+VP+\dots) VP_f$$

Here, “f” is the abbreviation of “focus”, synonymous with “peak”. In the study, we will probe into and enrich this discourse function of verbal *-le* on the basis of collected data. Consider the following sentences:

- (9) 他们夫妇坐上<a>自己的车, 我坐上包车, 鱼贯地出了大门。
The two of them got into the house rickshaws, which I took the hired one, and we went out the main gate one behind the other.
- (10) 他又弯下<c>身子, 拿起了脸盆。
He bent down and picked up the hand basin.

In the sentences above, verbal *-le* could be put in the blank of <a>, and <c>. However, semantically, they are less prominent than the last verb phrase. Thus no *-le* follows this verb to serve as a peak event. In contrast, the appearance of *-le* at the end of every sentence explicitly marks the peak event is the last one in a series of events. Furthermore, this conclusion testifies the argument that the natural sequential order of Chinese determines the last event as a prominent and essential one in a series of events. Therefore, in order to emphasize the peak event, verbal *-le* often comes in the last clause.

Apart from the sentences with serial verb construction, the pragmatic function of *-le*, peak marker, is also presented in pivotal sentence whose predicate consists of two verb phrases with the object of the first verb functioning at the same time as the subject of the second verb (Kang and Lai, 1990: 106). In this type of sentence, the second verb has a resultative meaning, as in sentences (11) and (12):

- (11) 我看见朋友闭了嘴, 我的好奇心也没有得到满足, 便追问道。
Seeing my friend had stopped shouting, with my curiosity still unsatisfied, I pressed on with my questions...
- (12) 我没办法分辨, 我知道我露了一点窘相。
I knew that I was looking a bit embarrassed.

According to Lü (1980: 315-316), verbal *-le* normally follows the second verb in pivotal sentences to emphasize the result of the event and these sentences convey both an actual event and a result event. As in the two sentences above, 闭了嘴“stop shouting” and 露了一点窘相“I was looking a bit embarrassed” are the result events while 看见“see” and 知道“know” are the action events whose actions are ensured by the verb that follows. As the actualization of a result event naturally entails that of an action event, if the result event carries *-le*, the actualization of both events can be guaranteed.

However, the actualization of an action does not necessarily entail the actualization of a result event. Consider the following sentences,

- (13) 我说：“我请了孤儿院的孩子来劈。”
I said: “I have a boy coming from the orphanage cleave wood.”
- (14) 我说：“我请了孤儿院的孩子来劈，（但是他没劈）。 ”
I said: “I have a boy coming from the orphanage cleave wood. But he didn’t do”

From sentence (13) we can see the action event 请“have” has actualized while the result event 劈“cleave wood” may or may not actualize. Meanwhile, sentence (14) explicitly presents the result event that lies in the state of unactualization.

Thus we come to the conclusion that when *-le* follows the action event, the actualization of the result cannot be ensured. This *-le* is just an anteriority marker which indicates the verb 请“have” before 劈 “cleave wood”, but not the peak marker. In light of the analysis above, we can grasp that in pivotal sentences, *-le* means the actualization of one or both events. If *-le* occurs in a result event, the event is the focus of the sentence.

Moreover, in regard to the peak-marking function of verbal *-le*, we can also find proof in English-Chinese parallel corpus to prove our viewpoint. Analyze the following sentence:

- (15) “Oh! ...you mean Jane, I suppose—because he danced with her twice....:
“哦。我想你是说吉英吧，因为他跟她跳了两次...” (Wang Keyi 1996)
“哦！我想你是指简吧，因为他跟简跳过两次...” (Sun Zhili 2000)

In the translations above, one uses *-le* and the other uses *-guo* to interpret that the action has actualized, but we believe Wang’s translation is more acceptable from the aspect of meaning of *-le* and *-guo*. Verbal *-le* indicates actualization of the event which has something to do with the present to some extent, while *-guo* focuses on the past experience. Besides, in the last clause of this sentence “because he danced with her twice”, the semantic focus is “danced”, and in order to present the prominent meaning of this verb and culminating position of this clause, we need to modify this verb with peak *-le* to achieve this effect. Therefore, “跳了两次” is more appropriate than “跳过两次” on the basis of analyses above. Similarly, tremendous examples can be found in our corpus to testify the peak-marking function of *-le*, such as:

- (16) “Oh! My dear.” Cried his wife.
“啊，天呐！”他太太尖叫了起来。(Zhao Xiaoli 2002)
“哩，天啊。”他的太太叫起来了。(Wang Keyi 1996)

4.0 Conclusion

The use of *-le* as an anteriority marker and a peak marker has been discussed above, and as for the distinction of these two markers, a valid and rational way is that *-le* in the last clause is the peak marker while in the former ones an anteriority marker. These two functions do not repel each other as both of them are derived from the notion that takes the whole series of events as a single one. The peak marking is from the situation that the event is at the last stage of a series of related events while the anteriority marking comes from the fact that the same sentence is divided into different clauses according to verbs first and then the divided clause is explained as one that begins after the end of the former one. The study of pragmatic functions of verbal *-le*, for one thing, deepens and enriches the understanding of the aspect meaning of verbal *-le*, for another, it provides the basis for the research into the translation of verbal *-le*.

Acknowledgement

The paper was funded by the project of the study of Shandong folk culture supported by Shandong Social Sciences Association & Shandong Provincial Department of culture.

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